

MEDIA REPRESENTATION OF MATERNAL NEONATICIDE

A Thesis

by

JOCELYN RENEE LEWIS

Submitted to Office of Graduate Studies of
Texas A&M University
in partial fulfillment of the requirements for the degree of

MASTER OF SCIENCE

May 2008

Major Subject: Sociology

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ABSTRACT

Media Representation of Maternal Neonaticide. (May 2008)

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The present research conducted a rich discourse analysis of an episode of the fictional television crime drama, *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, as well as a content analysis of local and national news transcripts focusing on the representation of mothers who commit neonaticide. Both fictional and non-fictional media sources exhibited aspects of the monstrous maternal theme and the strain defense theme. The monstrous maternal theme consists of words and statements that indicate the descriptions of crime committed against the newborn as well as negative responses and reactions by others to the young mother and her crime. The strain defense theme refers to instances that discuss the internal and external strains of the young woman that may have contributed to her committing neonaticide. However, the “monstrous maternal” is the prevailing representation of mothers who commit neonaticide in both fictional and non-fictional media sources.

This media representation utilizes “control talk” to separate “us” the good mothers, who abide by the cultural expectations of traditional gender roles and embrace the internal and external strains of motherhood, from “them” the criminal mothers, who fail to adhere to these role expectations of motherhood by committing neonaticide. The

present research reveals that cultural stories and scripts of the monstrous maternal still exist. This contemporary folklore may serve as a form of social control to scare women into conforming to these traditional gender roles and bearing the burden of the motherhood strains, in order to avoid being branded a bad mother.

Finally, the present research develops the application of General Strain Theory to explain the internal and external strains of a young woman that may contribute to her committing the criminal act of maternal neonaticide. These media representations of maternal neonaticide could impact the criminal justice system and public policy. Questions of accuracy, gendered understandings of crime and gendered understanding of appropriate punishment are areas the present research explores. Most importantly, the present research seeks to investigate the connection between legal culture in both media and professional practice – and what those connections mean for our general cultural understandings of violence and aggression in women.

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CHAPTER I

INTRODUCTION

The originating question of the present research is to determine how mothers who kill their children are represented in the media. Specifically, the present research analyzes the representation of these mothers in the fictional crime television series, *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, as well as non-fictional news media. Although the stories on the television show are fictional, the inspiration behind these stories is based on real events usually “ripped” from the news headlines. I provide a rich analysis of the discourse used by the detectives and psychiatrists during the investigations and by the defense and prosecution during the trials, to describe such mothers and the acts they commit. In addition, the present research analyzes the representation of filicidal mothers in local and national news media. I provide a content analysis of the use of “control talk,” a language used to differentiate “us” – the good citizens – from “them” the criminals (Cavender & Fishman 1998). This “control talk” is used to reinforce the traditional gender roles and social control of women, which result in the role strains of mothers.

The present research focuses even more specifically on maternal neonaticide, which is the murder of an infant by its mother on its first day of life (Resnick 1969, 1970). This topic receives extensive media coverage, because it invokes strong emotions in people – how could a mother kill her own child? The act is seen as a violation against

This thesis follows the style of *Publication Manual of the American Psychological Association*.

nature and the gender norms and expectations of mothers specifically and women generally. In our culture, a mother is supposed to be loving and nurturing to her children, and mothering is seen as an instinct. Sociologically significant, the present research is a macro level analysis of how both fictional and non-fictional media sources perpetuate these social norms and standards for women in our culture. In addition, these widely available texts serve as a contemporary folklore of maternal child murder, which shape viewers' and readers' social construction of this particular crime. As everyday educational sources, it is important for these fictional and non-fictional media to provide accurate information about women who commit neonaticide and the circumstances surrounding these acts. These programs could help people to identify and prevent a real occurrence, if they are ever confronted with a similar situation. Also, these media sources could indirectly influence public policy concerning the legal understanding and punishment of this crime.

Previous research in this field has centered on law and justice in film, and created content analyses of the race and gender composition of criminal offenders and victims in non-fictional news media and fictional crime television shows. In addition, scholars have studied how the language used by the members of the criminal justice system on these crime television shows serves to make the criminals appear different and separate from the rest of society. The present research contributes to the discipline because it focuses on mothers as the offenders and their children as the victims, and how these cases are represented in a fictional crime television show and in non-fictional news media coverage. The discourse used by these media sources portrays these mothers as "mad or

bad,” but still separate and different from other mothers in our society. In addition, the present research analyzes these media representations as contemporary folklore of maternal infanticide and investigates their purpose and cultural meaning. Questions of accuracy, gendered understandings of crime and gendered understanding of appropriate punishment are areas the present research explores. Most importantly, the present research seeks to investigate the connection between legal culture in both media and professional practice – and what those connections mean for our general cultural understandings of violence and aggression in women.

CHAPTER II

LITERATURE REVIEW

Maternal Infanticide Folklore

Hispanic folklore tells the story of La Llorona, or the Weeping Woman. She was a beautiful Indian girl by the name of Malinche, and was known for her vanity and for her hatred of her Indian origins. She fell in love with and became the mistress of the Spanish conquistador, Cortes, and bore two of his children. However, Cortes abandoned Malinche for a wealthy Spanish woman. One evening as Malinche walked along the river with her children, a carriage holding Cortes and his new wife pulled up alongside them. Cortes spoke to his children but ignored Malinche and continued down the road. Infuriated with Cortes and jealous of his attention to his children but not her, Malinche drowned her children in the river. Then Malinche committed suicide on the riverbank. The villagers found her body there the next morning and buried her in a white gown. The legend of La Llorona tells that her grieving spirit haunts the river at night searching for the children she killed. Parents warn their children not to wander too close to the river for La Llorona will grab a hold of them and murder them (Cyrino 1996).

Euripides' tragedy, *Medea*, similarly shares the story of abandonment, jealousy, rage, and child-murder, but performed as a play on the stage of the Greek amphitheater. In the play, Medea is married to Jason, a Greek hero, and they have two sons together. Like Malinche, Medea is abandoned by the man she loves, in this case, for the young princess of Corinth. Medea was a princess from a distant land, but she betrayed her father by killing her brother in order to run away with Jason to Greece. Socially isolated

from her homeland and rejected by the Greeks, Medea then experienced the abandonment by her husband and the jealousy of her sons for their continued relationship with their father. Their Nurse warned the children to stay away from their mother in her angry state, but Medea kills them as an act of revenge against Jason (Cyrino 1996).

Finally, Greek mythology presents the story of Lamia, a mortal woman who had an affair with the king of all gods, Zeus. After Hera, the goddess wife of Zeus, learned of the affair and the children born of it, Hera turned Lamia into a monster with the head and torso of a woman and the lower half of a serpent (Wikipedia 2007). Hera then made Lamia eat her own children and wander the earth in search of other children to eat. Mothers in Ancient Greece frightened their children with the story of the Lamia monster, a once loving mother that murdered her children and sought out more children to murder. Mothers used this myth to dissuade misbehavior from their children (Mythography 2006).

Folklore of filicide and infanticide has existed throughout history with different functions. The legends of La Llorona and Lamia serve as warnings to children to dissuade them from venturing out against their mother's wishes, but also to teach children to beware the potential child-killing monster within their own mothers. While the stories of La Llorona and the Lamia monster were shared orally, the tragedy of Medea was performed as a play in the amphitheater, and served as entertainment for the Greek people participating in the dramatic arts. Furthermore, these three tales function as a caution to mothers themselves that they possess the power to destroy the life they

create, and that they may not always have control over this power due to external or internal forces. Finally, this infanticide folklore reveals how a mother who murders her own children is, for all time, characterized as evil and monstrous, a representation which still exists today in American culture.

History of Infanticide

According to Langer (1974) and Moseley (1986), the act of infanticide reflects the cultural norms of a given society in history. The Babylonian and Chaldean civilizations, dating back to approximately 4000 to 2000 B.C., viewed handicapped children as omens of good or bad things to come; therefore, these children were unlikely to become victims of infanticide. However, the practice of infanticide became commonplace during the Greco-Roman civilization. Greek philosophers advocated small families for efficient functioning of the state. In addition, Greece and Rome were male-dominated societies giving the male absolute rule over domestic affairs. As a part of *patria potens*, or rights of head of household, the father decided the fate of illegitimate, female, or excessive children. Exposure of the newborn was the common method of infanticide. In fact, the folkloric stories of Oedipus from Greece, and Romulus and Remus from Rome begin with their exposure as newborns.

Throughout history, reasons for infanticide have included population control, illegitimacy, religious superstition, poverty, inability to care for the child, laws governing inheritance, and perceived disabilities and defects (Resnick, 1969/1970; Meyer & Oberman, 2001). With the rise of Christianity, Emperor Constantine declared infanticide to be a crime in 318 A.D because it defied the words of the Bible, to “be

fruitful and multiply” (Langer, 1974). However, according to Moseley (1986), infanticide of female and disabled newborns continued because of the need for strong males to work the land during the feudalist period in Europe. In addition, unwed mothers practiced infanticide because of fear of social banishment for violating religious rules, and fear of the financial responsibility of raising her child alone. Langer (1974) reveals how the abandonment of newborns in churches and other public places became so prevalent in the 1800s that hospitals in Europe became equipped with *tours*, or turntables on which mothers could anonymously place their newborn, ring a bell, and a nurse would turn the table and take in the child.

Prior to emancipation in the United States, some Black slave mothers would commit infanticide as an act of mercy and resistance (Roberts 1997). Black people were sold and treated like chattel by White slave-owners. Black female slaves were often forced to reproduce in order to increase slave-owners’ labor force. The children born to slave women were also the property of the slave-owner and endured a cruel existence of abuse, malnutrition, and death for more than one out of three Black children before the age of 10. It was arguably to protect them from the brutality of slavery that some slave mothers would kill their newborns (Roberts 1997). In addition, some slave mothers committed infanticide in order to defy the system of slavery itself, by refusing to provide offspring to perpetuate the system.

Infanticide and the Law

Since 1999, 47 states in the United States have passed Safe Haven laws to offer safe and anonymous means for a parent to surrender a child without the threat of

prosecution (National Abandoned Infants Assistance Resource Center, 2005). Also known as “safe surrender,” “baby drop off,” “baby Moses,” or “legal abandonment” laws, these laws allow the parent to relinquish their child with no questions asked at safe locations, such as hospitals, police stations, and fire stations (National Abandoned Infants Assistance Resource Center, 2005). These laws were enacted to prevent newborns from being abandoned in unsafe locations and risking death. However, some states have not provided necessary funding to publicize and educate the public about Safe Haven laws as options for these parents.

Despite tactics to reduce infanticide, it continues to occur, and is often undetected and unpunished. According to Meyer & Oberman (2001), women and men who have been charged for infanticide in the United States have been legally charged with first-degree murder, second-degree murder, child abuse, negligent homicide, felony child endangerment, involuntary manslaughter, negligent manslaughter, and abuse of a corpse. To date, there is no available data delineating the charges, convictions, and sentences of all maternal infanticide cases in the United States over time. However, Wilczynski (1997) examined case files of child-killings by parents in London, and found that criminal justice systems respond differently to men and women who have killed their children. Women were less likely than men to be prosecuted for or convicted of murder. In addition, women are more likely than men to use psychiatric pleas for their diminished responsibility and receive admittance into a psychiatric hospital for treatment. Finally, women are more likely to receive shorter periods of formal intervention and to be released much sooner than men serving indeterminate sentences.

British law considers the fact that a woman who commits infanticide is likely to be mentally unbalanced due to the hormonal effects of giving birth and lactation. Thus, Great Britain passed the Infanticide Act of 1922 and updated it in 1938 to ensure that charges no higher than manslaughter can be brought against these women. Although the United States currently has no unified law of punishing infanticide, law reviews have supported adoption of a similar law the British Infanticide Act of 1922 (Meyer & Oberman 2001).

Prevalence of Infanticide

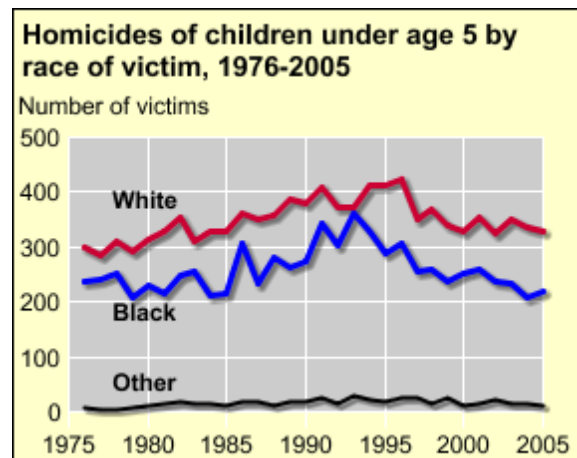


Figure 1. Homicide numbers of children under age 5 by race of victim, 1976-2005.

From Bureau of Justice Statistics. (2005). *Homicide Trends in the United States*. U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs. Retrieved October 11, 2007, from <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/homicide/children.htm>



Figure 2. Homicide victimization rates for children under age 5 by race of victim, 1976-2005.

From Bureau of Justice Statistics. (2005). *Homicide Trends in the United States*. U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs. Retrieved October 11, 2007, from <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/homicide/children.htm>

According to the U.S. Department of Justice, the number of homicides of children under the age of 5 increased through the mid-1990s, but has recently declined between the years 1976 and 2005 (see Figure 1). During this time period, the homicide victimization rates for black children under the age of 5 are greater than rates for white children or children of other racial groups (see Figure 2). However, the homicide victimization rates for black children have recently declined, with the lowest level recorded in 2004; while the rates for white children and children of other racial groups have remained relatively stable (see Figure 2).

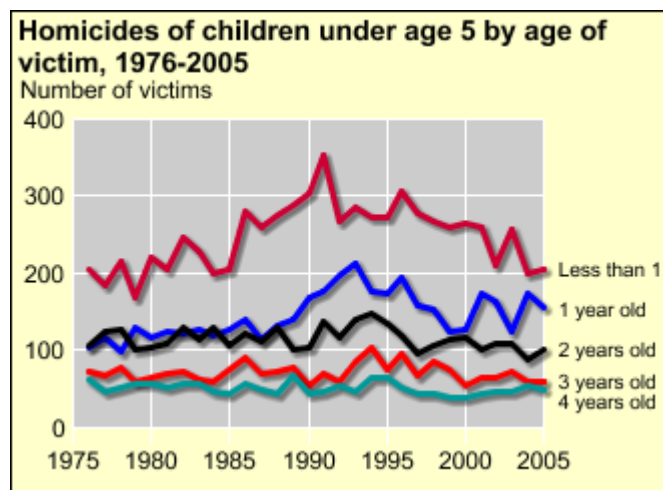


Figure 3. Homicide numbers of children under age 5 by age of victim, 1976-2005.

From Bureau of Justice Statistics. (2005). *Homicide Trends in the United States*. U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs. Retrieved October 11, 2007, from <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/homicide/children.htm>

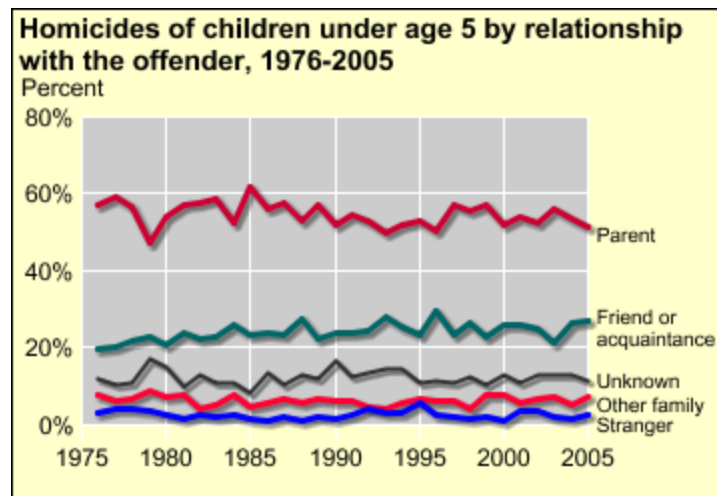


Figure 4. Homicides of children under age 5 by relationship with offender, 1976-2005.

From Bureau of Justice Statistics. (2005). *Homicide Trends in the United States*. U.S. Department of Justice, Office of Justice Programs. Retrieved October 11, 2007, from <http://www.ojp.usdoj.gov/bjs/homicide/children.htm>

The U.S. Department of Justice also found that the younger the child the greater the risk for infanticide with the largest number of child homicides occurring when the child is less than 1 year old (see Figure 3). In addition, a parent is the perpetrator in most homicides of children under age 5 (see Figure 4). Among children under age 5 in the United States who were murdered from 1976 to 2005, 60% were killed by their own parents: 31% were killed by their fathers, and 29% by their mothers (Bureau of Justice Statistics, 2005). Unfortunately, the Bureau of Justice Statistics do not identify the homicide of children less than 1 year old by the relationship with the offender, which would have been crucial to understanding the incidence of maternal infanticide.

Gauthier, Chaudoir & Forsyth (2003) analyzed state-level predictors of differences in maternal infanticide rates across a 13-year period (1984-1996). They defined maternal infanticide as “all killings by mothers of their own children who were newborn to one year in age” (Gauthier, et al. 2003: 398). The study found maternal infanticide to be the most typical form of female perpetrated child homicide in the United States occurring an average of 34 times per year during this time period. The rates of maternal infanticide ranged from a high of 31.76 per 100,000 live births in Colorado to a low of zero in 13 states. Measures of economic stress, per capita income and percent poor females aged 18–64, were both significant and positive predictors of maternal infanticide rates. However, measures of social support, geographic location (South regions v. non-South regions), and race/ethnicity of mother were not significant predictors of maternal infanticide.

Categorizing Child Murder

In 1969 and 1970, American forensic psychiatrist Philip Resnick presented the first attempt to categorize mothers who kill their children, which has become the most widely cited model in the field. Instead of using the term “infanticide” applied by previous literature to discuss all child murders by parents, Resnick recognized two groups of child murder. He coined the term “neonaticide” to identify infants who are murdered on their first day of life. “Filicide” is in contrast defined as the murder of a child older than 24 hours.

Resnick (1969/1970) examined the world literature on child murder between the years of 1751 and 1967, and identified 131 documented cases of filicide committed by mothers and fathers, and 34 cases of neonaticide where the mother acted alone. He divided the reasons parents committed filicide and neonaticide into five categories: unwanted child, acutely psychotic, altruistic, accidental, and spouse revenge. The highest percentage of neonaticides occurred because of an unwanted child. Resnick attributed this to the social stigma of being single and having a child outside of marriage, or being married and having another man’s child. Mothers who committed neonaticide were significantly younger than mothers who committed filicide. The most common methods of neonaticide were suffocation, strangulation, head trauma, drowning, exposure, and stabbing.

Since Resnick’s initial study, several studies have analyzed cases of child murder in different countries and developed their own categories; however, all of the studies share a common category of mothers who have committed neonaticide. Another British

forensic psychiatrist, d'Orban (1979) reviewed cases of English and Welsh mothers who killed their children, and identified five categories: battering mothers, mentally ill mothers, neonaticides, retaliating mothers, and mercy killings. Bourget and Bradford (1990) examined cases of child murder in Canada. They also identified five categories: pathological filicide (including mercy killings and homicide/suicides), accidental filicide, retaliating filicide, neonaticide, and paternal filicide. Wilczynski (1997) studied cases from England and Australia, and identified ten categories including retaliatory killing, jealousy of or rejection by the child, neonaticides, discipline resulting in death, altruistic mercy killing, parental psychosis, Munchausen Syndrome by Proxy, sexual or ritual abuse of the child resulting in death, neglect resulting in unintentional death, and unknown motives. Finally, Meyer and Oberman (2001) analyzed cases occurring in the United States during the 1990s, and also divided cases into five categories: neonaticide related to ignored pregnancy, purposeful filicide, neglect-related filicide, abuse-related filicide, and assisted/coerced by partner filicide.

Unlike the other studies categorizing child murder, Meyer and Oberman (2001) focused on the interaction and patterns of the social, cultural, and individual factors of the mothers in each category. Specifically focusing on their neonaticide category of child murder, they found that these mothers are very young with an average age of 19.3 years, and the youngest being 15 years. They are usually single, and tend to ignore and conceal their pregnancies. Thus, they usually do not form a bond with their fetus and fail to receive any prenatal care, often resulting in a low birth weight baby. The reason these young women deny and/or conceal their pregnancy is that they fear risking their

relationships with family, friends, or partner. In addition, many of these young women in this category experienced internal conflict because of their religious background and rules against premarital sex and abortion, or social norms against having a child out of wedlock. With no one to turn to for support and experiencing internal conflict, these young women tend to procrastinate making a decision about what to do until it is too late to legally terminate the pregnancy. They tend to give birth in non-hospital locations including bathrooms, bedrooms, and other undisclosed locations. Also, it is very common that these young women report having a dissociative episode during childbirth, in which they have no memory of it taking place.

All prior literature on maternal neonaticide provide objective patterns that exist in the studied cases regarding maternal age, denial and concealment of pregnancy, location of childbirth, mental state of during childbirth, and method of neonaticide. Although these studies briefly mention social control explanations for the actions of these young women, none have used or applied a formal theory. The present research contributes to the discipline by using General Strain Theory to help explain maternal neonaticide.

General Strain Theory

Robert Agnew (1992) developed General Strain Theory to identify micro-level influences on strain and to explain why individuals who feel more stress and strain are more likely to commit crimes. Each source of strain increases the likelihood of experiencing such negative affective states including anger, frustration, disappointment, depression, and fear. The greater the intensity and frequency of strain experiences, the

greater their emotional impact and the more likely they are to cause delinquency, violence, drug abuse, and dropping out of school. Agnew (2001) defines three types of strain: objective, subjective, and emotional. Objective strains refer to events or conditions that are disliked by most members of a group, while subjective strains refer to a person's evaluation of an event or condition he or she experienced. Emotional strain is the emotional response to an object, behavior, or idea. The theory argues that strains are most likely to result in crime when they are seen as unjust, are seen as high in magnitude, are associated with low social control, and create an incentive to engage in crime in order to cope.

Agnew (1992) argues that there are three sources of strain which lead to negative emotions and criminal behavior. First, failure to achieve positive valued goals stems from the inability to achieve ideal goals stressed by one's culture. For instance, when a young person aspires for wealth and fame but lacks the financial and educational resources to reach the goal, he/she then assumes that these positively valued goals are impossible for him/her to achieve. This disjunction between expectations and achievements can create strain, and individuals who perceive this difference as unjust will be motivated to reduce the gap between expectations and achievements by participating in criminal behavior. Second, the actual or anticipated removal of positive stimuli is a form of strain. This strain may lead to crime as a way to prevent the loss of the positive stimuli, retrieve the lost stimuli, seek revenge against those responsible for the loss, or to cope with the loss with drug use. Finally, strain is caused by the experience of negative stimuli such as child abuse and neglect, crime victimization,

physical punishment, family and peer conflict, and school failure. Criminal behavior may occur as a way to escape or terminate the negative stimuli, seek revenge against those responsible for the negative stimuli, or to cope with the negative stimuli with drug use.

Strains of Motherhood

Across time and cultures, the majority of parents share common strains related to parenthood. They stress over providing the basic necessities of food, clothing, and shelter, but also over the socialization and schooling of their children. Although the available resources and opportunities vary, most parents strive to provide a good life for their children. Contemporary motherhood is likely no different in terms of levels of strain. But the strains are likely quite different as our society changed from an agrarian way of life to a capitalist, industrial, and now post-industrial society, resulting in today's high standard of living usually requiring two incomes from work outside of the home. These strains of motherhood are arguably amplified due to the lingering traditional gender role expectations of mothers, which conflict with contemporary economic and work demands.

In her book, *Heroes in Their Own Lives*, Linda Gordon (1988) conducted a historical study of child abuse and neglect cases in Boston between the years 1880 and 1960, while also analyzing the economic and political strains on mothers during this time period. Poverty was a common factor of the families involved in these child-protection cases. Many mothers sought assistance from the child-protection agencies to leave their abusive or unsupportive husbands. However, the middle class patriarchal

social norms of the agency workers led them to enforce their own traditional gender role expectations on these mothers seeking help for themselves and their children. The agency workers encouraged these women to be the good mother and wife by remaining with their husbands. Single working mothers were stigmatized as bad mothers by agency workers, and rarely received monetary assistance from the state because they defied these social standards. In addition, their children were more frequently taken away from them on charges of neglect, due to the mother's lack of supervision of their children while she was working to provide for them.

In American culture today, the standards of being a good mother can be directed by the media, creating new strains for contemporary mothers. The so-called, "New Momism" describes "a set of ideals, norms and practices, most frequently and powerfully represented in the media, that seem to surface to celebrate motherhood, but which in reality promulgate standards of perfection that are beyond your reach" (Douglas & Michaels, 2004: 4-5). Contemporary mothers are viewed as a market; so while the media constructs these standards of a good mother, it also promotes consumerism. Specialized books, magazines, television shows, and commercials bombard mothers with information on what they need to do and buy, in order to insure the development of a physically, emotionally, psychologically, and intellectually healthy child. Thus, mothers experience the strain of being perceived as a bad mother by other mothers if she does not purchase the products which the media deems necessary. This barrage of the media market leaves mothers feeling overwhelmed as they strain to reach this unattainable standard of motherhood (Douglas & Michaels, 2004).

The strains of motherhood also stem from the realm of employment and the decision of whether to be a stay-at-home mother or a working mother. In her book, *The Truth Behind the Mommy Wars*, Peskowitz (2005) analyzes the media-contrived “Mommy Wars” staged between stay-at-home mothers and working mothers. Much media has posed this feud as a catfight, in which mothers on each side argued why those on the other side were bad mothers; however, the true structural problems facing parents, especially mothers, was sadly missed. The traditional gender role expectations, that women are the home and child care-takers while men are the breadwinners, remain apparent by the lack of flexibility improvements in the workplace for both mothers and fathers. Peskowitz (2005) reveals how women are more likely than men to make job and career sacrifices once children are born, due to the lack of choices provided by their workplace. In our culture, mothers – single, married, and of all races – experience the same strain of making the best decision for their family and their self; however, someone always ends up losing because of these structural barriers.

The Mommy Myth discusses how the media depiction of this good mother standard creates strain on motherhood by further dividing mothers by class and race, instead of unifying them to overcome the structural obstacles faced by all mothers (Douglas & Michaels, 2004). Celebrity mom profiles feature smiling celebrity women with their children on magazine covers or entertainment television segments gushing over the joys of motherhood and how they love spending all their time with their children, and revealing the designer clothes and accessories they have bought their children. This media representation divides mothers by social class, because mothers in

middle and lower social statuses do not have the same resources and opportunities as mothers in a higher celebrity status. Also, through television news stories, the media separates “us,” the good mothers, from “them,” the terrible mothers, which also tends to divide along the lines of race. The good mothers tend to be portrayed as White, married, middle-class, middle-aged, and well-educated, while the terrible mothers tend to be depicted as Black, single, working-class, teenage, and on welfare (Coontz, 1992; Douglas & Michaels, 2004).

Construction of Crime on the News

Today, the news is available 24/7 through the advanced telecommunication powers of our mass media. Because of this greater availability, news stations compete for viewers’ attention by utilizing high tech visuals, as well as, dramatic and emotional stories. A recent study of fifty-six cities found that crime was the most frequently featured topic in local news, accounting for more than 75 percent of the news coverage in some cities (Klite, Bardwell, and Salzman 1997). However, televised news tends to over-represent violent crimes which distorts the real world for viewers because crime reports indicate that non-violent, property crimes are in fact more common than violent crimes (Dominick, 1973; Sheley & Ashkins, 1981; Sacco, 1995; FBI Uniform Crime Reports).

The representation of crime by televised news influences viewers by perpetuating negative racial stereotypes. Minorities, especially African Americans, accounted for the majority of violent crime suspects in a study of Los Angeles local news, when in reality minorities actually account for the largest share of property crimes (Gilliam & Iyengar,

2000). This study also conducted an experiment with four manipulations in which participants would watch the same news report of a violent crime, including either a mug-shot of a Black suspect or mug-shot of a White suspect, or no mention or image of the perpetrator's race, or no crime news report. More participants accurately recalled a Black perpetrator in the first condition than a White perpetrator in the second condition. In the no race condition, 60% of the participants falsely recalled having seen the perpetrator, and 70% of these participants identified the perpetrator as African American (Gilliam & Iyengar, 2000). Thus, the crime news story persists as a narrative internal script, in which viewers fill in the blanks with the negative racial stereotypes reinforced by televised news.

Chiricos, Eschholz, & Gertz (1997) study found that increased television news consumption is significantly related to higher levels of fear of crime only for middle-aged White females, regardless of whether or not they have recent victim experience, perceive their neighborhoods to be safe, or have high or low incomes. In analyzing the crime reality television program, *America's Most Wanted*, Cavender, Bond-Maupin, & Jurik (1999) determine that the narratives produce and exaggerate a dangerous world in which women are vulnerable and should fear crime. During the narratives, most women victims were portrayed as weak and innocent as they recounted their emotions related to their victimization. In addition, an overwhelming majority of crimes against women on the television show were committed by men; and the most frequent crimes against women were murder or attempted murder, which is far greater than real-life crime statistics (FBI Uniform Crime Reports, 1996).

Fictional Crime Television Dramas

Eschholz, Mallard & Flynn (2001) conducted a content analysis of the 2000-2001 season of two crime dramas, “Law & Order” and “NYPD Blue,” to explore the race and gender composition of television offenders, victims, and criminal justice personnel, civil rights violations, and “control talk,” which emphasizes an “us” against “them” mentality. According to Cavender & Fishman (1998), “control talk” is a form of political language used to discuss the crime problem and what should be done to solve it, and is particularly used to make criminals appear different and separate from the rest of society. The study found that in both shows African Americans were portrayed more than Whites as offenders than any other character roles. Men are shown more than women in all character roles, especially as offender. Finally, the study found that insulting language, one form of “control talk,” pervaded both programs to portray the criminals as less than human. Words such as “skanks,” “dirt bags,” “low lives,” “riff-raffs,” and “thugs” were used to describe these criminals to separate them from the rest of society.

Cuklanz and Moorti (2006) analyze how the crime drama, *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, creates the idea of the “monstrous maternal” during episodes dealing with crimes committed by women. During these narratives, the power that women possess in the private sphere is represented as dangerous due to the “misguided sense of caring and nurturing or pathological selfishness” of these mothers (Cuklanz & Moorti, 2006: 316). The monstrous maternal involves women who have failed in their role as mother, as determined by the patriarchal system, by causing serious harm or even death to their

children. The monstrous maternal narratives also often blame mothers for crimes committed by their children due to their bad mothering more than fathers are blamed for their bad fathering.

CHAPTER III

HYPOTHESES ARTICULATED

Connecting General Strain Theory and Maternal Neonaticide

Motherhood can be a very rewarding stage of life, but it can also be challenging and full of stressful changes. Even women who are emotionally ready and mature, economically stable and prepared, and have available social support, experience some physical, psychological, emotional, and financial stress and strain once they have a child. So for women who are lacking in any of these areas the potential amount of stress and strain related to motherhood that they might experience is increased. For some women, unforeseen traumatic events and changes occur after the arrival of children – such as postpartum depression, divorce, loss of job or social support, and assimilating into a new culture. From the previous discussion of child murder categorization studies, we find that these events and changes, as well as others, have been the catalysts that lead some mothers to commit child murder (Resnick, 1969 & 1970; d’Orban, 1979; Bourget & Bradford, 1990; Wilczynski, 1997; Meyer & Oberman, 2001).

Previous literature of maternal neonaticide provide patterns that exist in the studied cases regarding age, denial and concealment of pregnancy, location of childbirth, mental state of during childbirth, and method of neonaticide. Although these studies briefly mention social control explanations for the actions of these young women, none have focused on using a formal theory. The present research contributes to the discipline by using General Strain Theory to hypothesize the internal process that occurs within these young women, leading them to commit neonaticide. By connecting General Strain

Theory and the strains of motherhood to the previous literature, the present research explores a gendered understanding of crimes committed by mothers against their children, as well as their representation in the media.

I propose that when these young women become pregnant, they believe they have failed to achieve positively valued goals. By becoming pregnant at a young age, these women believe they have failed to reach the goals they had for themselves and the expectations that their parents had for them associated with being a good daughter. The positively valued goals of and placed on these young women usually involve graduating high school, attending college or a trade school, getting a job, and waiting until marriage or a stable relationship to have children. These young women experience strain due to the disjunction between the expectations associated with these positively valued goals and what she will be able to achieve as a young, unwed mother.

In addition, these young pregnant women experience the strain related to the anticipated loss of the positive reinforcement and support she received from her parents, friends, teachers, and other important people, and their replacement with the presence of negative consequences associated with being a young, unwed mother. These strains may include being forced to marry too soon, being disowned by her family, being excommunicated by her religious group, dropping out of school, losing her friends, having the economic burden of being a young single mother, and many more.

Using General Strain Theory, I hypothesize that this internal strain and stress leads to negative feelings of fear and disappointment, which then leads these young women to deny and conceal their pregnancy from the important people in their life. They

have denied their pregnancy even to themselves so successfully, that the birthing process is confusing and dissociative. However, after giving birth, these young women are faced with the reality of their situation, and their baby is the living proof that the strains they feared of being a young mother would come true. These previous strains, coupled with the trauma of unassisted delivery and the presence of the baby, lead to the negative affective states of fear, frustration, anger, and disappointment. In order to stop the experience of these negative emotions, these young women resolve to detach themselves from the source of their problem – the baby – by committing neonaticide. By ridding themselves of the baby, these young mothers free themselves from the actualized strain and stress of failing to achieve positively valued goals, losing positive stimuli, and gaining negative stimuli.

The goal of the present research is not to test this hypothesized use of General Strain Theory to explain maternal neonaticide by studying case files and interviewing women currently incarcerated for this crime. Rather, this research examines the media representations of this crime. Specifically, I propose that local and national news and fictional television crime drama will utilize aspects of this hypothesized use of General Strain Theory in their representation of maternal neonaticide.

Connecting Media Studies and Maternal Neonaticide

Prior media studies found that crime news programs tend to over-represent violent crimes and perpetuate narratives of negative racial stereotypes. In addition, these programs show women as vulnerable victims, and increase their fear of victimization. However, there is a lacking in research focusing on the media representation and

influence of crime news that focus on females as criminals. Contributing to the discipline and a more gendered understanding of crime, the present research addresses the gap in the literature by specifically looking at the representation of mothers who commit neonaticide on the local and national news, as well as on the fictional crime television drama, *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit (SVU)*.

The present research utilizes the concepts of the “monstrous maternal” and “control talk” from previous media studies on fictional crime television dramas. I propose that the analyzed non-fictional and fictional media sources use “control talk” to separate “us” the good mothers from “them” the criminal “monstrous maternal” who commits neonaticide. As a contemporary folklore of maternal infanticide, these media representations serves as a form of social control and reinforcement of the cultural gender expectations of women as natural nurturers of children.

CHAPTER IV

DATA AND METHODS USED

For the non-fictional crime media analysis portion of this study, I used NEXIS – a news database which provides full text articles from newsmagazines, regional and national newspapers, newsletters, trade magazines, and abstracts – to access transcripts of television and newspaper coverage of cases involving mothers who killed their children. I utilized the search terms: “infanticide,” “neonaticide,” “filicide,” “child murder,” “murder of daughter,” “murder of son,” “murder of child,” “death of her child,” “child homicide,” “homicide of child,” “death of child,” “murder her baby,” and “killed her baby.” Along with each search term, I applied the narrowing search term “mother” in order to focus my search on news transcripts involving mothers who committed neonaticide between the years 1997 and 2007. I chose this 10-year time period because the last analysis of maternal neonaticide and filicide conducted by Meyer and Oberman (2001) used data from the years 1990 to 1999, so the present research provides a contemporary analysis of news media of maternal neonaticide.

Specifically, the news transcript had to mention that the baby was a newborn or that the baby was killed on its first day of birth, thus, qualifying as a maternal neonaticide. I collected and analyzed 17 local news transcripts and 8 national news transcripts from searches of the Northeast, Southeast, Midwest, and Western regions dealing with maternal neonaticide. For the local news transcripts, there was 1 from the San Francisco Chronicle; 3 from the Associated Press State & Local Wire for the states of Colorado, Iowa, and Louisiana; 3 from the Patriot Ledger in Massachusetts; 1 from

Telegram & Gazette in Massachusetts; 1 from News & Record in North Carolina; 4 from the Daily News in New York; 1 from the New York Post; 2 from the New York Times; and 1 from the Virginian Pilot. For the national news transcripts, there was 1 from CNN Prime News; 1 from CNN Morning News; 1 from CNN Today; 1 from CNN Larry King Live; 1 from Anderson Copper 360 Degrees; 1 from CNN Burden of Proof; 2 from CNN Nancy Grace; and 1 from the Oprah Winfrey Show.

The previous literature on “control talk” and “monstrous maternal” did not provide a method of operationalizing these concepts. I conducted a content analysis by systematically reading and analyzing each transcript and writing down words and statements and tallying up the frequencies. Typically, the transcripts included similar components: description of and the circumstances surrounding the neonaticide, demeanor of the mother, background of mother, the reactions and statements from defense attorneys, prosecution, psychiatrists, judges, police, jury members, and spectators or witnesses. I reviewed and interpreted the tallied words and statements to develop themes.

For the fictional crime media analysis portion of this study, I analyzed one 40-minute episode of the television series, *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, specifically dealing with a young mother who committed neonaticide. The episode “Taboo” was purchased from iTunes, a popular computer media player. Initially, I planned to analyze another episode; however, after further examination of this episode, I realized that it did not meet the criteria of a maternal neonaticide as identified by Resnick (1969, 1970) and Meyer and Oberman (2001). Thus, for the episode “Taboo,” I transcribed and conducted

a detailed discourse analysis on quotations relating to the representation of this maternal neonaticide. The analysis focused on the demographics of the mother including age, race, class, and marital status; the social and individual circumstances surrounding the mother; the mother's perception of and reasoning behind her crime; the discourse used by the detectives and the defense, prosecution, and judge during the crime investigation and trial to describe the mother and her crime; and the verdict.

CHAPTER V

ANALYSIS OF DATA

Non-Fictional Crime Media Analysis

The Representation of Maternal Neonaticide in the News

After conducting a content analysis of the 17 local news transcripts and 8 national news transcripts, two dominant themes arose from the collected words and statements – monstrous maternal and strain defense. These themes identify the two main representations in the non-fictional crime news media of a mother who commits neonaticide.

The monstrous maternal representation uses “control talk” to separate “us” the good mothers, who abide by the cultural expectations of traditional gender roles and embrace the internal and external strains of motherhood, from “them” the criminal mothers, who fail to adhere to these role expectations of motherhood by committing neonaticide. Table 1 provides illustrative examples of direct quotations from the local and national news transcripts comprising the monstrous maternal theme. The strain defense representation utilizes the proposed application of General Strain Theory to explain the internal and external strains of a young woman that may contribute to her committing the criminal act of maternal neonaticide. Table 2 provides illustrative examples of direct quotations from the local and national news transcripts comprising the strain defense theme.

Table 1

Monstrous Maternal Representation in News Transcripts

Quotations of the Monstrous Maternal Theme
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ “She told authorities she punched herself repeatedly in the abdomen and when she gave birth to the baby Oct. 2 in her apartment, she wrapped the infant in a towel, placed it in a bag, and put the bag in a closet for three days.” (Minor, 2002) ▪ “The state medical examiner's office said the boy was born alive at full term, and died of skull fractures caused by blows and shaking.” (Mother guilty, 1998) ▪ “‘To sleep on your bed with your dead child underneath, I believe, is depraved,’ Bucci said.” (McGurk & Delfiner, 2003) ▪ “A Long Island woman accused of killing her newborn son on Christmas Day 2001 is suspected of murdering a second baby eight months earlier, a prosecutor said yesterday.” (Martinez, 2004) ▪ “A newborn girl was thrown to her death from a third-floor bathroom window here on Saturday morning in an apparent act of revenge by the mother against the baby's father, the authorities said today.” (Hanley, 1997) ▪ “Melissa Drexler: On the morning of the prom, my water broke. While I was on the car on the way to the prom, I began to have cramps. I went to the prom, I went into the bathroom and delivered the baby; the baby was born alive. I knowingly took the baby out of the toilet and wrapped a series of garbage bags around the baby. I was aware of what I was doing at the time when I placed the baby in the bag, and I was further aware that what I did would most certainly result in the death of the baby.” (Waters & Tuchman, 1998) ▪ “John Kaye, Monmouth County Prosecutor: We feel great compassion for the child, the victim. It's a human being in its most defenseless time of its life. The person that you expect to help it the most is actually the person that killed it.” (King, 1998) ▪ “Oprah Winfrey: When 15-year-old Jessica Coleman became pregnant, she kept it a secret from everybody. She delivered the baby boy at home, alone, in her bathroom. Later, she stabbed him in the chest and hid his lifeless body in her closet. The next day, Jessica's boyfriend dumped their dead baby in a nearby quarry. The young couple promised each other they would never tell a soul.” (Salata & Erspamer, 2006) ▪ “Detective Karl Yost, Lorain County Sheriff's Department: I was looking for a monster, I won't lie to you. Who would stab a child, crush its skull, stuff it in a plastic bag, put it in a duffel bag, pile rocks on top of it, zip it shut, throw it in a quarry, never to be heard from again?” (Salata & Erspamer, 2006)

Table 2

Strain Defense Representation in News Transcripts

Quotations of the Strain Defense Theme
<ul style="list-style-type: none"> ▪ “‘She's still dealing with not only the physical shock of giving birth but also some emotional and mental trauma,’ Hale added.” (Goodyear, 1999) ▪ “‘Mendes is an undocumented immigrant who came to the United States from El Salvador seven months before the baby's death.’” (Mother indicted, 1997) ▪ “‘Her ambition was to ‘become a successful broadcaster and have the ability to control my own future.’ But by the time she started classes at UMass in September, her future was already spinning out of control. She was pregnant. Her college friends noticed her gaining weight, suspected she was pregnant and reached out to no avail.’” (Race & Rothstein, 2002) ▪ “‘Jerry Noble, a clinical psychologist, testified that he had diagnosed Phifer with dissociative amnesia, which causes fragmented memory. He said she suffered from schizoaffective disorder, an illness marked by major depression and psychotic symptoms, and bulimia nervosa, an eating disorder.’” (Christian, 1997) ▪ “‘‘This woman has a long history of serious emotional problems,’ Hynes spokesman Jerry Schmetterer said.’” (Katz, 2003) ▪ “‘She was young and unable to support a child financially, and faced fierce family opposition to her pregnancy. In addition, Hernandez maintained from the beginning of the investigation that the child resulted from a rape.’” (Ross, 2001) ▪ “‘Benjamin Brafman, Former Federal Prosecutor: And Amy, having just given birth -- I mean, how many mature adult women would have presence of mind to understand completely what's happening at that very moment. She's alone. She's in a motel room with another kid. She's a kid herself. She thinks she's had a miscarriage or a still born, and you are going to assess criminal responsibility for her failure to get a doctor at that moment?’” (Van Susteren et al, 1998) ▪ “‘Here’s what we know about neonaticide, which is actually the elimination or killing of a child within 24 hours of its birth. And it tends to happen within the age range of 16 to 38, in most cases, 25 and under. And in some cases, these women, either due to fear or adjustment disorder, really don’t attach to their pregnancy and they deny it. And so when they give birth, in some cases, that’s the first time that they know that they are pregnant, and they eliminate the child out of fear of losing support...’” (Grace, 2006a) ▪ “‘Jessica was very much the all-American girl. She was a role model for every young kid. She was a great sister. She had tons of friends.’” (Salata & Erspamer, 2006)

Demographics

From the 25 local and national news transcripts, the average age of the young women who committed neonaticide was 20.9 years, with an age range of 15 to 38 years (see Table 3 and Table 4). The race/ethnicity of the young women was never identified, unless the woman was an immigrant. Five of the young women were identified as high school students, one as a college student, one as a waitress, and three as illegal immigrants working odd jobs to send money to family in Mexico or El Salvador. One of the women was identified as already having another child 2 years of age. The births resulting in neonaticide mainly occurred at the woman's home or apartment, but some also occurred away from home at a motel or in a bathroom at prom. Two of the births were assisted by a boyfriend or male cousin. The sex of the baby was mentioned in the news transcripts with 6 girls and 14 boys born.

The method of neonaticide was most often putting the baby in a plastic bag and leaving it in a garbage can or dumpster. Other methods included head injuries, stabbing, strangling, burning, shaking, leaving in a vacant area, sinking in a body of water, and throwing out of an apartment window. These young women were convicted of criminal charges included first-degree murder, second-degree murder, manslaughter, child endangerment, and gross abuse of a corpse. Sentencing ranged from time in an institution for psychological evaluation and treatment to 6-15 years in prison.

Results

For each of the 17 local news transcripts, Table 3 shows the media source, state and date of the news story, the name and age of the mother who committed neonaticide, and the frequency count of the monstrous maternal theme and the strain defense theme.

Table 3

Local News Media Representation of Maternal Neonaticide

	Media Source	State	Date	Name	Age	Monstrous Maternal Count	Strain Defense Count
1	The San Francisco Chronicle	CA	8/24/1999	-	17	2	3
2	The Associated Press State & Local Wire	CO	6/29/2004	Griselle Suarez	20	3	1
3	The Associated Press State & Local Wire	IA	4/11/2001	-	17	3	10
4	The Associated Press State & Local Wire	LA	11/16/2003	Kimberley Lauff	23	2	15
5	The Patriot Ledger	MA	6/13/2002	Jennifer Paluseo	19	3	8
6	Telegram & Gazette	MA	1/29/2002	Amie L. Sorel	21	11	0
7	The Patriot Ledger	MA	9/12/1997	Glenda Rivera Mendes	21	4	2
8	The Patriot Ledger	MA	4/23/1998	Amy Grossberg	19	9	4
9	News & Record	NC	8/27/1997	Racquel Nichole Phifer	20	11	27
10	Daily News	NY	6/25/2003	Denise Valerio	22	3	7
11	The New York Post	NY	5/16/2003	Kathleen Brown	26	24	1

Table 3 continued

	Media Source	State	Date	Name	Age	Monstrous Maternal Count	Strain Defense Count
12	Daily News	NY	1/10/2004	Kathleen Brown	26	8	0
13	The New York Times	NY	1/6/1997	Bacilia Lucero	22	5	0
14	The New York Times	NY	1/7/1997	Bacilia Lucero	22	12	2
15	Daily News	NY	8/21/2000	Janine Suter	30	5	3
16	Daily News	NY	8/22/2001	Silvia Hernandez	18	5	8
17	The Virginian-Pilot	VA	11/20/1998	Deadra Shanae Walden	18	8	4
Total Count						118	95

Sources: 1. Goodyear, Charlie. Newborn found dead in San Ramon home. (1999, August 24). *The San Francisco Chronicle*, A16. 2. Abandoned baby dies after being disconnected from life support. (2004, June 29). *Associated Press State & Local Wire*, State and Regional Section. 3. Glover, Mike. (2001, April 11). House approves modified "Safe haven." *Associated Press State & Local Wire*, State and Regional Section. 4. Mothers not using state law to protect unwanted babies. (2003, November 16). *Associated Press State & Local Wire*, State and Regional Section. 5. Race, Tamara & Rothstein, Kevin. (2002, June 13). Woman charged in baby's death; DA: Plymouth woman left body in trash. *The Patriot Ledger* (Quincy, MA), News 1. 6. Minor, Bradford L. (2002, January 29). Ware baby's body found, mother held. *Worcester Telegram & Gazette*, A1. 7. Mother indicted in death of infant. (1997, September 12). *The Patriot Ledger* (Quincy, MA), News Section 7. 8. Mother guilty of manslaughter in baby death. (1998, April 23). *The Patriot Ledger* (Quincy, MA), News Section 9. 9. Christian, Paula. (1997, August 27). Phifer sentenced to at least 10 years; Baby Jane Doe's mother is sentenced in the death of her infant. *News & Record* (Greensboro, NC), A1. 10. Katz, Nancie L. (2003, June 25). Mom who killed her baby cops to insanity plea. *Daily News* (New York), News 6. 11. McGurk, Joe & Delfiner, Rita. (2003, May 16). Cold-hearted mom faces life in slay of newborn. *The New York Post*. 12. Martinez, Jose. (2004, January 10). Mother killed her two newborns: Cops. *Daily News* (New York), News Section 7. 13. Newborn is thrown into alley and dies. (1997, January 6). *The New York Times*, B4. 14. Hanley, Robert. (1997, January 7). Newborn girl is slain for revenge, officials say. *The New York Times*, B4. 15. Gearty, Robert. (2000, August 21). Mom nabbed in death of her newborn. *Daily News* (New York), Suburban Section 6. 16. Ross, Barbara. (2001, August 22). For teen who killed baby, 7 years & judge's advice. *Daily News* (New York), News Section 4. 17. Dolan, Matthew. (1998, November 20). Teen will go to prison for murder of her baby. *The Virginian Pilot* (Norfolk, VA), B1.

As shown in Table 3, there were a total of 213 instances of words and statements counted in the content analysis of the 17 local news transcripts. Of the 213 instances, 118 were categorized under the monstrous maternal theme, making up 55.40% of the total. Likewise, 95 were categorized under the strain defense theme, making up 44.60% of the total counted words and statements. In addition, of the 17 local news transcripts, 10 were dominated by the monstrous maternal theme while only 7 were dominated by the strain defense theme. Thus, in the local news media coverage, the theme of the monstrous maternal is the prevailing representation of mothers who commit neonaticide.

For each of the 8 national news transcripts, Table 4 shows the media source and date of the news story, the name and age of the mother who committed neonaticide, and the frequency count of the monstrous maternal theme and the strain defense theme.

Table 4

National News Media Representation of Maternal Neonaticide

	Media Source	Date	Name	Age	Monstrous Maternal Count	Strain Defense Count
1	CNN Prime News	6/9/1997	Melissa Drexler	19	6	4
2	CNN Morning News	8/20/1998	Melissa Drexler	19	5	0
3	CNN Today	8/20/1998	Melissa Drexler	19	9	2
4	CNN Larry King Live	10/29/1998	Melissa Drexler	19	4	9
5	CNN Burden of Proof	3/10/1998	Amy Grossberg	18	10	16
6	CNN Nancy Grace	1/9/2006	-	15	26	18
7	CNN Nancy Grace	10/9/2006	-	-	15	15

Table 4 continued

	Media Source	Date	Name	Age	Monstrous Maternal Count	Strain Defense Count
8	Oprah Winfrey Show	11/3/2006	Jessica Coleman	15	37	59
Total Count					112	123

Sources: 1. Chen, J., & Quarles, N. (1997, June 9). Baby Discovered in New Jersey Was Alive at Birth.” *CNN Prime News*. [Television broadcast]. Cable News Network. 2. Kagan, Daryn & Tuchman, Gary. (1998, August 20). New Jersey “Prom Mom” pleads guilty to aggravated manslaughter. *CNN Morning News*. [Television broadcast]. Cable News Network. 3. Waters, Lou, & Tuchman, Gary. (1998, August 20). Melissa Drexler pleads guilty to murdering newborn. *CNN Today*. [Television broadcast]. Cable News Network. 4. King, Larry. (1998, October 29). Melissa Drexler sentenced to 15 years in prison. *CNN Larry King Live*. [Television broadcast]. Cable News Network. 5. Van Susteren, G., Cossack, R., & Franken, B. (1998, March 10). Teen father accused of killing his child pleads guilty. *CNN Burden of Proof*. [Television broadcast]. Cable News Network. 6. Grace, Nancy. (2006a, January 9). Did 15-year-old new mother dump baby in trash bin? *Nancy Grace*. [Television broadcast]. Cable News Network. 7. Grace, Nancy. (2006b, October 9). Newborn found alive in trash bag. *Nancy Grace*. [Television broadcast]. Cable News Network. 8. Salata, Sheri (Executive Producer), & Erspamer, Lisa (Executive Producer). (2006). Why 15-year-old Jessica Coleman killed her baby? [Television series episode] *The Oprah Winfrey Show*. Chicago, IL: Harpo, Inc.

As shown in Table 4, there were a total of 235 instances of words and statements counted in the content analysis of the 8 national news transcripts. Of the 235 instances, 112 were categorized under the monstrous maternal theme, comprising 47.66% of the total. Likewise, 123 were classified under the strain defense theme, making up 52.34% of the total counted words and statements. In addition, of the 8 national news transcripts, 4 were dominated by the monstrous maternal theme, 3 were dominated by the strain defense theme, and 1 was tied. However, the Oprah Winfrey Show is a talk show, not a news program; and if this transcript is not included in the analysis, then the weights shift in the other direction. Without the counts from the Oprah Winfrey Show, there are 75 counts categorized under the monstrous maternal theme, comprising 53.96% of the total

139 instances; and there are 64 counts classified under the strain defense theme, making up 46.04% of the total 139 words and statements. Thus, in the national news media coverage, the theme of the monstrous maternal is the prevailing representation of mothers who commit neonaticide.

Fictional Crime Media Analysis

The Show

Law & Order: Special Victims Unit (SVU) was created in 1999 by Dick Wolf. It chronicles the criminal investigations and trials of the Special Victims Unit of the New York Police Department. The elite squad of detectives investigates sexually based crimes, as well as crimes involving special victims, including children. The process of the investigations and trials in each SVU episode mirrors real-life criminal investigations and trials. Each episode involves the investigation of a crime – homicide, assault, and/or rape. The audience follows the detectives as they follow leads, interview witnesses and victims, and interrogate perpetrators. Some cases require the assistance of forensic psychiatrists in order to understand the “criminal mind.” The episodes also involve the interactions between the assistant district attorney with the defense lawyers, district attorneys, and judges in the quest to prosecute the perpetrator. Most episodes conclude with the trial and sentencing of the defendant.

The Characters

Detective Olivia Benson (Mariska Hargitay) is a biracial (White and unknown) single woman, who is the product of her mother’s rape. Detective Benson struggles during the cases involving perpetrators who claim that they commit rape and other

aggressive crimes because of their genetics. She wonders if she was drawn to the aggressive job of law enforcement because of her father's genes. In addition, her mother was an alcoholic and abused her while growing up. Although she is kind and nurturing to the children involved in *SVU* cases, she vows to never have children of her own because she has both nature and nurture aspects working against her.

Detective Elliot Stabler (Christopher Meloni) is a White, Catholic man who is married with four children. He is an ex-Marine who frequently gets reprimanded for his aggressive behavior towards male perpetrators of sex crimes. He works hard to remove rapists and child molesters from the streets because he believes he is protecting his wife and children from potential harm. However, the long hours he devotes to his job frequently takes him away from his family and takes a toll on his marriage, eventually leading to a divorce. Cases involving mothers who kill their own children especially hit home for Detective Stabler, because he recalls the frustration he experienced when his first child would cry as a baby.

Stabler: "Every parent has been there. The baby crying can make you lose your mind. You pick them up. You rock them. You'll beg them. Sometimes nothing works."

(Green & Makris, 2003)

Detective John Munch (Richard Belzer) is a White, Jewish man who has been married and divorced several times. He is very knowledgeable about politics and government, and frequently rants about government conspiracies. Cases involving mothers who kill their own children bring back memories from Detective Munch's past.

Munch: "I looked at that four-year-old and flashed on a little girl that used to live across the street from us in our old neighborhood. She had that same look in her eyes...sad, lost. She used to stand on her porch

every afternoon when I came home from school, like she was waiting for me. Sometimes she'd have a black eye or a bloody lip, just looked at me like she was trying to tell me something. But I was too full of my own teenage crap to pay any attention. One day I came home and she wasn't there. Found out here mother threw her through a plate glass window. I went to the funeral, saw her dad. It was the first time I saw a grown man cry. They sent the mother to a sanitarium. She told my mother, she didn't understand what all the fuss was about. She was the one that had to get a new window."

(Eckerle & Taylor, 2000)

Detective Fin Tutuola (Ice-T) is a Black, single man who has a son that he rarely sees and struggles to form a relationship with. Before he came to work for the Special Victims Unit, he did undercover work for the New York Narcotics department. Now he has connections on the inside of the criminal world – drug dealers, and such – that he uses to find out information for some cases for the Special Victims Unit.

Captain Donald Cragen (Dann Florek) is an older, White man in his mid-50s, who has had alcohol abuse problems in the past. Although a recovering alcoholic, he is well-respected by the detectives, psychiatrists, medical examiners, and assistant district attorneys that work in the Special Victims Unit. He also serves as the intermediary between the Special Victims Unit and the press when the department needs to deliver a message or picture to the people in order to solve a case.

Assistant District Attorney (A.D.A.) Casey Novak (Diane Neal) is a White, female prosecution attorney who takes over the position in the fifth season of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*. She also works with the detectives, psychiatrists and medical examiners of the Special Victims Unit. She helps the detectives get search warrants, negotiates deals with defense attorneys, and uses the evidence collected in the investigations to prosecute the defendant during the trials.

Dr. Melinda Warner (Tamara Tunie) is a Black, female medical examiner and forensic expert. She independently examines the bodies of the victims to assess their medical condition and cause of death. She then informs the detectives estimated time of death or exposure to trauma leading to death, which helps the detectives in their investigations. In addition, Dr. Warner serves as a witness during trials to testify her medical examination and assessment.

Dr. George Huang (B.D. Wong) is an Asian, forensic psychiatrist and expert on the “criminal mind.” The detectives and assistant district attorneys of the Special Victims Unit respect and rely on Dr. Huang for his evaluation, assessment, and diagnoses of the perpetrators. In addition, he serves as a witness during trials to testify his professional assessment and diagnoses of these perpetrators.

The Representation of Maternal Neonaticide in Law & Order: Special Victims Unit

“Taboo” (episode aired January 17, 2006; DeNoon & Forney, 2006)

The episode opens with two female New Yorkers finding a newborn baby boy inside a closed black, garbage bag sitting on a pile of other trash on the side of the street. In the garbage bag, the baby lay crying in a cardboard box with old clothes and bloody bed sheets which the mother had given birth on, that were placed on top of the baby to muffle his crying.

Scene 1: At the hospital in the scrub-in room, Detectives Benson and Stabler talk to a doctor about the condition of the baby boy, who lies in an incubator in the sterilized room next door.

Doctor: Baby Boy Doe, 6lbs 2oz., Caucasian.

Benson: How long was he in the trash?

Doctor: He couldn't have been born more than 2 or 3 hours before they found him.

Stabler: (*washing his hands*) Garbage truck was no more than a block away.

Doctor: His umbilical cord was clasped off with this or else he would've bled to death (*holding up a clear plastic Ziploc evidence bag with a bloody clip inside*)

Benson: (*reading the clip in the bag*) Gourmet Coffee.

Stabler: (*drying his hands*) Guess he interrupted breakfast. What are his chances?

Doctor: (*all three walk into the sterilized room*) He's lethargic from dehydration and hypothermia, but otherwise healthy. We got fluids and formula in him, some nice warming lights and he perked right up. Never got to bond with his mother so he needs all the human contact he can get. (*All three stand over the baby in the incubator*)

Stabler: (*putting his hand in the incubator and holding the baby's hand in his*) Welcome to the world there, tough guy. (*Cue opening music*)
(DeNoon & Forney, 2006)

The beginning scene of this episode in the hospital reveals “control talk” of the “monstrous maternal.” As a father, Detective Stabler clearly has disdain for this mother by his sarcastic remark of this mother’s monstrous nature, in that, this mother was so enraged or annoyed by the disturbance of childbirth to her daily routine that she decided to throw her baby away. This “control talk” separates the good mothers, who embrace their natural expectation of motherhood, from the criminal bad mothers who dispose of their children in the garbage. Furthermore, the doctor insinuates that because this newborn has been denied the instant bond with his mother that he is damaged for the rest of his life. This is also a subtle form of “control talk” in that it indicates that motherhood is natural for women and good mothers must bond with their newborn as soon as it enters the world or else it is somehow doomed. In this scene, “us” the good mothers are then separated from “them” the criminal bad mothers or “monstrous maternal” by our adherence to this traditional gender expectation.

Scene 2: At the Special Victims Unit station, Detectives Benson, Stabler, Munch, and Tutuola stand with Captain Cragen and Dr. Huang at the drawing board of an enlarged area map of New York City to locate the crime scene and radius of investigation.

Captain Cragen: Here's another mystery. Why would a mother throw her own baby in the trash?
(DeNoon & Forney, 2006)

While brainstorming the investigation at the station, the Captain asks this rhetorical question to his unit of detectives. This question has been resonating in the minds of the viewers for the first six minutes of this episode, and is finally vocalized by a character in the show. However, this is an assumption on the part of Captain Cragen that this is a crime of the “monstrous maternal” without any definite evidence to base this accusation. This question initiates a “witch hunt,” so to speak, for a woman who threw away her newborn. Also during this scene the forensic psychiatrist Dr. Huang is present but does not answer the Captain's question utilizing his formal knowledge of psychology to explain criminal behavior. Perhaps as a professional he chose not to fuel the assumption of the responsibility of the mother in the abandonment of this baby until the acquisition of conclusive evidence.

Scene 3: The grey and gloomy interrogation room in the SVU station with exposed pipes and barred screen covering the window. Detectives Benson and Stabler sit on opposite sides of the table while interrogating Ella, who is Caucasian with long straight red hair and freckles from a middle to upper class socioeconomic background.

Benson: So, how old are you, Ella?

Ella: (smiling, sitting in oversized blue sweatshirt) 20

Benson: Wow! You're just a kid. Way too young to be starting a family.
Ella: Yeah. It's not even something I've thought about. I'm not pregnant.
Stabler: (*sitting across the table from Ella*) Not any more.
Ella: I've never been pregnant.
Benson: So would you consent to a medical exam?
Ella: Why?
Benson: To eliminate you as the person who gave birth in that dorm room.
Ella: No one gave birth in my dorm room. I don't even know anyone who's been pregnant.
Stabler: You look just like him.
Ella: Who?
Stabler: Your son. (*throws Polaroid pictures across the table at her*)
Ella: I don't have a son.
Stabler: "You carried him 9 months. You didn't want him. You had legal options. You have a problem with abortion that's your choice. I understand that. There's adoption. (*raising his voice*) You chose to give birth.
Ella: (*shaking her head*) You have the wrong person.
Stabler: (*stands up and moves from opposite side of the table towards Ella; yelling in her face*) You chose to walk 6 blocks with him, right past a fire house and a hospital where under Safe Haven laws you could've just left him anonymously.
Ella: Why are you yelling at me?
Stabler: Because you tossed him in the trash like the garbage you are. All those choices, how is that even an option? (*leaves the interrogation room very angry, breathing heavy*)

Captain Cragen: (*talking to Stabler, outside the interrogation room*) Interrogation 101 overcoming resistance with compassion.
Stabler: I can't. Not with this one. That kid she just threw him away. (*He sits down on bench, angry, breathing heavy. He leaves this investigation to spend time with his children*)
 (DeNoon & Forney, 2006)

The reaction of Detective Stabler is an overt and aggressive identification of and response to the "monstrous maternal." His statements represent "control talk" as a form of social control separating the criminal mother, who makes the wrong choices regarding motherhood and throws her baby in the trash, from the good mother, who even if she cannot support their own child she cares enough about her baby to surrender it to a

family who can support it. Working for the SVU, Stabler handles murderers, rapists, and child molesters every day; but when he states that he cannot show compassion for this young woman, we see that in his mind maternal neonaticide is the absolute worst and most heinous offense possible. This scene serves as contemporary folklore of the maternal infanticide story. The purpose, however, is not to scare little children of the “monstrous maternal,” but rather to strike fear in the hearts of young women to dissuade them from following the path of Ella because they will surely be aggressively scorned as a monster and receive no compassion or understanding.

Scene 4: After Detective Stabler leaves the investigation to spend time with his children, Detective Benson continues to question Ella in interrogation room.

Benson: Manhattan Institute of Technology. That’s impressive. You have to be a genius to get in, don’t you?

Ella: I’m on full academic scholarship.

Benson: What’s your major?

Ella: Environmental engineering.

Benson: So you’re a Junior, means you only have one more year to go. I could understand how devastating that would be to be so close and then have to give it all up.

(DeNoon & Forney, 2006)

Detective Benson takes the opposite stance of Stabler, by incorporating the proposed connection between General Strain Theory and maternal neonaticide. During this scene Benson is trying to get a confession out of Ella, but her logic is to address the internal strains that Ella might have experienced during her pregnancy in order to explain why Ella abandoned her baby which would have resulted in a neonaticide. She assumes that by becoming pregnant a young woman would be forced to abandon her positively valued goals to achieve a higher education and attain a prestigious profession.

The strains of motherhood are difficult enough for any woman, but those on a young, unprepared single woman can be even more trying.

Throughout the interrogation with Benson, Ella begins to pace back and forth, sweating and feeling chills. She eventually faints in the SVU station from being septic, and is sent to the hospital to reveal that part of the placenta was still attached to her uterine wall, which proves she did in fact give birth. Ella tells Benson that she was raped, and this baby was the result of it. This statement of course stumps Benson because as a product of her mother's rape, she wonders how things would have been different if her own mother threw her in the trash just like Ella did to her own baby.

*Scene 5: Assistant District Attorney (ADA) Casey Novak walks into the SVU station and shows a newspaper to Detective Benson who is sitting at her desk. The front page headline of New York Ledger reads “**GENIUS THROWS BABY IN TRASH**” in bold black capitalized letters with picture of Ella smiling superimposed over a backdrop of trash bags and boxes on the side of the street.*

ADA: Why haven't you arrested Ella Christenson?

Benson: She's not going anywhere I have a guard on her at the hospital. I just wanted to look into this rape allegation.

ADA: She never reported being raped.

Benson: 60% of rape victims don't.

ADA: And a bigger percentage aren't looking at an attempted murder in the 2nd degree.

Benson: Ella was traumatized.

ADA: Even if she was raped it doesn't excuse trying to kill the result of it.

Benson: But it would affect how you charge her.

ADA: *(pulls up the newspaper)* “Genius Throws Baby in Trash.” How do you think I should charge her?

Captain Cragen: I just got a call from Samaritan Hospital in Newark. A nurse there remembers Ella from about a year ago

Benson: She was raped.

Captain: No. She had just given birth but didn't have a newborn to show for it. They called the cops. This nut-case is a serial baby killer (*cue intense, serious music. Close up on Captain's serious face and Benson looking shocked*)
(DeNoon & Forney, 2006)

Scene 6: After Ella is discharged from the hospital, she is driven to the courthouse for arraignment. As Ella and Detective Benson exit the car and walk towards the courthouse, they are swarmed by media cameras and reporters, as well as protestors holding posters and shouting at Ella. The posters say, "Monster," "Baby Killer," "Bring Back the Death Penalty," "Tie Her Tubes," and "Safe Haven Saves Lives."

Reporter: Why did you abandon your baby?
Protestor: You're disgusting! That's sick!
Protestor: Sterilize her!
(DeNoon & Forney, 2006)

The episodes of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit* are fictional yet also inspired by true events. When real cases of maternal neonaticide occur, the news media coverage of these crimes is indeed very similar to this fictional newspaper, which will be discussed further in the quantitative section of this analysis. In these two scenes, the news media representation, the revelation that Ella has committed neonaticide before, the outrage of the protestors, and the demands for justice by sterilization or capital punishment provide more fuel to the representation of Ella as the "monstrous maternal." As contemporary folklore of the maternal infanticide story, the meaning behind these representations is to warn young women who become pregnant, that if they commit neonaticide they will receive no compassion or understanding, and will rather be publicly scorned and portrayed as a baby-killing monster.

Scene 7: The arraignment of Ella in the courtroom. The prosecution Assistant District Attorney (ADA) Casey Novak stands on right side of the room, while Ella and her Defense attorney stand on the left side of the room.

Judge: People v. Ella Christenson, Attempted Murder in the Second Degree, Child abandonment, and Endangerment of a child. How do you plea?

Ella: Not guilty.

ADA: \$1 million bail. The defendant is a flight risk. Given the severity of her crimes and the fact that she killed a baby once before.

Defense: My client was never charged with that crime. In fact there was no crime. That fetus was stillborn. This poor girl lost a child. How dare the people twist that tragic incident to suit their own needs.

ADA: You have got to be kidding me.

Defense: My client doesn't have even as much as a parking ticket.

ADA: I'm sure if she did she would throw it in the trash along with her babies.

Judge: As I believe the client is not a threat to anyone but her own offspring, the court is requesting that in exchange for a lower bail amount, she does not get pregnant again before trial.

Defense: That's unconstitutional.

Judge: I'm not ordering that she be sterilized. But if you do become pregnant again, young lady, you will be found in contempt of this court. You think you could manage to comply with that order, Miss Christianson?

Ella: I don't know.

Judge: Bail is set at \$2 million cash or bond.
(DeNoon & Forney, 2006)

For the first time in the episode, there is an opposition between the prosecution's argument of Ella as the "monstrous maternal" and the defense's argument for the strains of young and unprepared motherhood. The prosecution uses sarcasm to establish Ella as the "monstrous maternal" by how casually she throws her babies in the trash, as if throwing away a parking ticket. The defense sticks to the facts the Ella indeed was never charged for the first alleged neonaticide, but represents Ella as a grieving mother whose child was stillborn. When the judge establishes Ella as a threat to her own children and

requires Ella to not become pregnant again, she confirms the “monstrous maternal” representation of Ella. In addition, this is a form of “control talk” which separates “us” the good mother from “them” the criminal mother who requires the legal system to control her procreative rights.

Scene 8: After Ella’s arraignment, the detectives, Captain Cragen, and Dr. Huang meet back at the SVU station to discuss the case. Dr. Huang uses his expertise in forensic psychiatry to assess Ella’s emotional state during the arraignment.

Dr. Huang: Her affect was flat, almost dissociative.

Captain: You think she’s setting the stage for a psych defense?

Huang: Well it would be hard going if she is.

Benson: Because she’s faking it?

Huang: No. Because DSM-IV diagnostic standards still don’t exist for postpartum psychiatric illnesses. Many courts bar its admission. That’s the reason why infanticide sentences vary so wildly in this country. Some women are given the death penalty and others are given probation.

Captain: You think postpartum depression should excuse murdering your child?

Huang: It’s not depression. I think she’s suffering from postpartum psychosis.

Benson: Giving birth made her crazy?

Huang: It’s a hormonal imbalance stemming from pregnancy. It’s onset can be quick and severe. It’s symptoms include agitation, hallucinations, delusions.

Captain: The Andrea Yates defense.

(DeNoon & Forney, 2006)

As contemporary folklore of maternal infanticide, this scene serves to educate and influence public policy. By discussing the symptoms of postpartum depression and psychosis, this media representation could motivate the DSM-IV to formally recognize this illness, and could help viewers identify and prevent a real occurrence maternal child murder. In addition, this media representation, as contemporary folklore, could help influence the legal understanding and punishment of this crime. The United States

should establish a universal law like the Great British Infanticide Act of 1922, which takes into consideration the hormonal imbalance occurring within a woman who has just given birth the explain infanticide and sets a minimum legal charge of manslaughter. In this way, the criminal act of the mother should not be viewed as the “monstrous maternal,” but rather as victim of overpowering internal strains of motherhood.

Scene 9: In the courtroom, Ella sits on the stand and relays her account of the events. Her defense attorney questions her first; then Assistant District Attorney (ADA) Casey Novak cross-examines her.

Ella: I couldn't comprehend what had just come out of me.

Defense: You're a bright girl, Ella. Manhattan Institute of Technology, engineering major, Dean's list, and yet you didn't recognize a baby?

Ella: No. It looked mutated to me and deformed. I didn't know what it was. But I knew it couldn't possibly survive. I put it in a cardboard box and then put that in a garbage bag.

ADA: What else did you put in the bag Ella?

Ella: Nothing.

ADA: *(holds up a large plastic evidence bag with bloody sheets inside)* People's Exhibit C, the sheets on which the defendant gave birth.

Ella: I don't remember doing that.

ADA: They were further evidence of your crime. You had to get rid of them too. Along with old clothes to muffle her babies cries

Ella: I don't remember.

ADA: What do you remember, Ella?

Ella: Being outside walking

ADA: To throw away your baby as far away as possible to cover up your crime.

Ella: No. I didn't even know I had anything in my hands until it started to feel heavy. And then I looked down and saw it was a garbage bag. I sat it on a pile of trash then turned around and went to class.

ADA: Did you tell anyone about what you had done?

Ella: No.

ADA: Not even the baby's father?

Ella: No.

(DeNoon & Forney, 2006)

Again the defense and prosecution face off in their interpretations of Ella's actions. The defense paints Ella as an intelligent and ideal student, who experienced a dissociative state brought on by the hormone imbalance after giving birth, leading her to misconstrue the condition of the baby and to abandon it unknowingly. However, the prosecution views the acts of concealing her pregnancy from everyone and the disposing of the evidence leading her to crime as confirmation of Ella as the calculating "monstrous maternal."

Scene 10: Ella is found not guilty of child abandonment and not guilty of second degree murder by reason of mental disease or defect, and remanded to the state psychiatric hospital. Before Ella is taken to the psychiatric hospital, Detective Benson visits her in the holding cell.

Ella: (*lucid and crying*) I got rid of them myself. I just thought that if I just ignored them they'd just go away and like it never happened. But then once they were born, I couldn't because they just kept screaming and crying and screaming. So I threw them away and then they really didn't exist, and I was right all along.

Benson: Your first baby wasn't stillborn.

Ella: No.

Benson: Charges were never filed on your first baby's death. I'm going to have to tell the New York DA's office.

Ella: (*Returns to flat affect*) Tell them what? (*End of episode, cue serious music*)

(DeNoon & Forney, 2006)

We leave the episode no longer believing in the defense's argument that Ella was suffering from postpartum psychosis which led to the abandonment of her babies. The flat affect was a charade which she dropped to reveal the truth to Detective Benson and then reinstated at mention of future legal action for her first neonaticide. Ella is portrayed as a conniving "monstrous maternal" who does not exhibit the cultural

expectations of a good mother, who is naturally inclined to patiently cradle her baby until it stops crying. Instead Ella got aggravated by the babies' cries and decided to throw them in the trash. Thus, in this episode of *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, the overall representation of a young mother who commits neonaticide is that of the "monstrous maternal."

CHAPTER VI

CONCLUSIONS

The present research conducted a rich discourse analysis of an episode of the fictional television crime drama, *Law & Order: Special Victims Unit*, as well as a content analysis of local and national news transcripts focusing on the representation of mothers who commit neonaticide. Both fictional and non-fictional media sources exhibited aspects of the monstrous maternal theme and the strain defense theme. The monstrous maternal theme consists of words and statements that indicate the descriptions of crime committed against the newborn as well as negative responses and reactions by others to the young mother and her crime. The strain defense theme refers to instances that discuss the internal and external strains of the young woman that may have contributed to her committing neonaticide. However, the “monstrous maternal” is the prevailing representation of mothers who commit neonaticide in both fictional and non-fictional media sources.

This media representation utilizes “control talk” to separate “us” the good mothers, who abide by the cultural expectations of traditional gender roles and embrace the internal and external strains of motherhood, from “them” the criminal mothers, who fail to adhere to these role expectations of motherhood by committing neonaticide. Moreover, this representation is used as a form of social control to scare women into conforming to these traditional gender roles and bearing the burden of the motherhood strains, in order to avoid being branded a bad mother. However, by separating “us from them,” the use of control talk in these media representations of mothers who commit

neonaticide may fail to educate about the strains on these young mothers leading them to criminal behavior. Because the control talk discourages viewers from understanding or sympathizing for these young women, these media representations may prevent viewers from identifying and preventing a real occurrence, if they ever encounter one.

The present research develops the application of General Strain Theory to explain the internal and external strains of a young woman that may contribute to her committing the criminal act of maternal neonaticide. In addition, the present research determines that fictional and non-fictional media representations of maternal neonaticide do in fact utilize aspects of this proposed application of General Strain Theory to explain maternal neonaticide, as revealed in the strain defense theme. Support for this proposed application of General Strain Theory in explaining maternal neonaticide lends further theoretical support of General Strain Theory in explaining another form of criminal behavior. Future developments from the present research should attempt to test this proposed application of General Strain Theory by studying case files and interviewing women currently incarcerated for this crime.

These media sources of mothers who kill their children are contemporary folklore of maternal infanticide. The ancient myths of the Lamia monster and the tales of La Llorona and Medea served to dissuade children from disobeying their mother. Ancient folklore, like contemporary folklore of maternal infanticide, also function to remind mothers of the internal and external forces that may overpower them and lead them to murder their children. Most importantly, the representation of mothers who kill their children as a monster remains apparent today. Instead of being depicted as a

serpent-like monster or a haunting spirit, mothers who kill their children today are publicly scorned by millions of people who are informed by the mass media.

The present research reveals that cultural stories and scripts of the monstrous maternal still exist. This contemporary folklore may serve to reinforce the traditional gender roles and social control of women, or to dissuade mothers from killing their children to avoid the invasion of the media that will most likely represent her as the “monstrous maternal.” It may also function as an educational source by spreading the message about Safe Haven laws in 47 of the 50 states in order to prevent mothers from committing neonaticide in the future. Future expansion on the present research should conduct audience studies including post-viewing interviews and focus groups as well as online blog postings and discussions about fictional and non-fictional media representations of maternal neonaticide. By studying how the audience sees and interprets these media representations, we can understand how real cases of maternal neonaticide become folklore, and how this folklore functions in the real world.

Finally, these media representations of maternal neonaticide could impact the criminal justice system and public policy. Future developments from the present research should investigate if and how folklore of maternal neonaticide and infanticide influence the legal understanding and punishment of this crime. By analyzing cultural and legal narratives, we can understand how folklore may have impacted the creation of the British Infanticide Act of 1922 and its revision in 1938, or how it may influence the current pursuit and support of law reviews in the United States for the adoption of a similar law.

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EDUCATION

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PUBLICATIONS

Green, S.D., Peterson, R., & Lewis, J.R. (2006). Language and literacy promotion in early childhood settings: A survey of center-based practices. *Early Childhood Research and Practice*, 8(1).

PRESENTATIONS

“Media Representation of Maternal Neonaticide.” Presented at Southwestern Social Science Association. Las Vegas, NV. March 2008.

RESEARCH INTERESTS

Gender, Media, Motherhood, Criminology, Culture, Social Problems, Family, Marriage

HONORS AND AWARDS

2005-2008	Graduate Diversity Fellowship, Texas A&M University
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POSITIONS HELD

Fall 2006 – present	Graduate Research Assistant for Holly Foster, PhD Department of Sociology, Texas A&M University
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